

KOREA: MOVING THE GOALPOSTS IN WAR

COLIN S. HELMER
COURSE 5602
THE NATURE OF WAR
SEMINAR A

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The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish ...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.¹

Carl Von Clausewitz

Know what you are getting into. Good advice then and good advice today. The thesis of this paper is that U.S. political and military leaders followed Clausewitz's advice at the start of the Korean War, but then lost their way. U.S. strategy changed from waging a limited war to restore South Korea's sovereignty within its original borders, to an unlimited war to destroy the regime in North Korea and unite the peninsula under the South, and then back to the goal of restoring the *status quo ante bellum*. The story of how and why these policy shifts took place offers some potential lessons for the conduct of future wars.

Moving the goalposts in Korea had negative consequences. Foremost among them were millions of additional casualties that could have been avoided if UN forces had stopped at the 38th parallel.² For the U.S., losses also included wastage of precious military strength, damage to civil-military relations and domestic controversy that fueled one of the ugliest political debates in U.S. history. Hypothetically, it is possible that the U.S. and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) might have been able to establish diplomatic relations years earlier than they actually did

¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, p. 88, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1976.

² One estimate is that 35,000 Americans, 900,000 Chinese and 3 million Koreans lost their lives in the war. Thomas G. Paterson and Denis Merrill (eds.), *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations Since 1914, Vol. II*, p. 367, Houghton Mifflin Co., New York, 1995.

had not the bad blood of the Korean war lain between them. This could have had positive consequences for the course of the Cold War and the conflicts associated with it.

THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The place to begin understanding why U.S. leaders made the choices they did is the strategic environment of the time. Concern about Communist expansionism was at a peak in early 1950, following Russia's explosion of the atomic bomb and the Communist victory in China. To counter the threat from the USSR and its allies, the U.S. launched its policy of containment, codified in April 1950 in National Security Council document NSC-68. However, in a January 1950 speech Secretary of State Dean Acheson drew a rhetorical Asian borderline for containment that excluded South Korea. North Korean leader Kim Il Sung already had sought Soviet support for an invasion prior to Acheson's speech,³ but Acheson's failure to place South Korea behind the frontlines of containment (a failure duplicated by other prominent Americans) was symbolic of how little attention the U.S. paid to Korea prior to the war.

The Truman Administration was more concerned with Europe than with Asia, for it was in Europe that it expected to fight the USSR should war break out. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) advised President Truman that they "considered Korea strategically unimportant in the context of a possible global war, in which Russia, not China, would be the chief antagonist."⁴ They suggested that "any commitment on the use of military force to defend it would be ill-advised in

³ Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur's War: Korea and the Undoing of an American Hero*, p. 14, The Free Press, New York, 2000.

⁴ J. Lawton Collins, *War in Peacetime: The History and Lessons of Korea*, p. 205, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1969.

view of the United States' heavy international obligations compared with its current military strength.”⁵

The U.S. had mixed feelings about South Korea and its President, Syngman Rhee. The U.S. had brought Rhee back from exile, but had grown alarmed by his calls for using force to reunify the peninsula and had withheld significant military aid. According to a member of MacArthur's staff, Republic of South Korea (ROK) forces were little more than “gendarmes [who] could not stop any kind of offensive.”⁶ The USSR, however, had provided significant military aid to North Korea, including planes, heavy artillery and tanks. Soviet military advisers helped train the North Korean army, which was seasoned by Korean veterans of the Communist campaign in China.

Thus when North Korea invaded on June 25, 1950, the Truman Administration faced the following situation: it was engaged in a global contest with the Communist Bloc that had the potential to break out into a new world war; it had limited military resources, most of which were committed to defending Europe; it had a partner in South Korea of questionable character and uncertain strength; and its top military advisers doubted whether it was worth fighting a war to keep South Korea in the non-Communist camp. So why was it that the U.S. ultimately decided to go to war in Korea?

THE INITIAL POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

Part of the answer can be found in the policy of containment. The Truman Doctrine, announced by the President in a speech to a joint session of Congress in 1947, committed the

⁵ Denis D. Wainstock, *Truman, MacArthur and the Korean War*, p. 12-13, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1999.

⁶ Weintraub, p.25.

United States “to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.”⁷ South Korea’s attempt to resist invasion from the Communist North seemed to be covered by this commitment. Another factor supporting U.S. intervention was domestic political pressure from the right-wingers in Congress and the press – of particular concern to the Truman Administration with mid-term Congressional elections scheduled in November.

President Truman decided that if the U.S. failed to maintain South Korea’s independence “no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors.”⁸ At his direction, the State Department drafted a resolution for the UN Security Council that would provide a legal and diplomatic basis for allied military action. This draft, which the Security Council approved with few changes, established political objectives of “an immediate cessation of hostilities, a restoration of the 38th parallel and the withdrawal of North Korean forces behind that line.”⁹ The initial U.S. approach thus consisted of a limited war against North Korea (not its Soviet and Chinese patrons) to re-establish the *status quo ante bellum*. It did not, in the beginning, even contemplate military action on North Korean soil.

Another way in which the U.S. determined to pursue limited, as opposed to absolute, war was in its decision not to use nuclear weapons. Immediately following the North’s invasion, the CIA and U.S. military intelligence prepared option papers for the use of atomic bombs. The targets they identified proved to be either politically unsuitable (either in China or on the border with the PRC) or capable of being destroyed with conventional weapons. As long as the war was

⁷ Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938*, p. 82, Penguin Books, New York, 1987.

⁸ Wainstock, p. 20.

restricted to the Korean Peninsula, there seemed to be little reason to use nuclear weapons. The U.S. deployed nuclear-capable bombers and nuclear bomb components to Guam as a contingency, and to remind the Soviet Union and China that they existed as an option, but no additional steps were taken to prepare for their use in Korea.¹⁰

MOVING THE GOAL POSTS

Washington's approach to the war changed, however, following the successful invasion at Inchon. With North Korean forces in retreat, U.S. and South Korean ambitions increased. President Rhee ordered South Korean troops across the 38th parallel and pressed for allied troops to follow. MacArthur sought authorization to take the war to the North.

President Truman decided to change U.S. political and military objectives. In a message approved by Truman, Secretary of Defense George Marshall wrote to MacArthur: "we want you to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38th parallel."¹¹ Truman also approved a JCS directive establishing a new military objective of the destruction of the North Korean armed forces.¹² The U.S. obtained a new resolution from the UN General Assembly. It called for "all appropriate steps to be taken to ensure conditions of stability throughout Korea" and sought "elections, under the auspices of the United Nations, for the establishment of a unified, independent and democratic government in the sovereign state of Korea."¹³

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Weintraub, pp. 250-53.

¹¹ Wainstock, p. 60.

¹² Collins, p. 147.

¹³ Ibid., p. 149.

With these steps, U.S. political objectives shifted to annihilation of the North Korean regime, which could not be expected to survive the destruction of its army, and unification of Korea under a government acceptable to Washington. While Truman Administration officials maintained limits on the operations of U.S. forces within North Korea, they merely fretted when MacArthur bent the rules. The only restrictions that Washington firmly maintained in this phase of the war were a prohibition on military operations against PRC territory and the non-use of nuclear weapons. While these were operational limits, their real purpose related to entities outside the theater of combat (i.e., China and the Soviet Union). Within the context of the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. was waging unlimited war against the North Korean regime for unlimited political objectives.

WHY THE CHANGE IN PLANS?

What caused the U.S. to lose sight of its original objectives and change the nature, character and conduct of the war that it had been waging? First, it was hard to ignore the success of allied forces in rolling back the North Koreans. Rhee and MacArthur succeeded in their aim of creating “facts on the ground” that would force a change in policy. Once allied forces were across the line, and encountering only weak opposition, it was politically awkward for Washington to call them back.

Second, the institutions in Washington responsible for advising President Truman became divided among themselves as to the advisability of proceeding north. While key players in the State Department, notably Paul Nitze and George Kennan, remained concerned about the reaction of China and the Soviet Union, U.S. military leaders supported taking the war to North Korea. The JCS maintained that stopping at the 38th parallel would solve nothing politically or militarily, and would leave the ROK exposed to continuing threats from the North. On the other

hand, a successful drive to the North could unite Korea under one government and establish a defensible natural frontier along the Yalu and Tumen Rivers.¹⁴ While civil-military differences were papered over in a September 11, 1950 NSC document, they continued to hamper policy coordination and promote confusion about the objectives of the war.

Third, U.S. policy makers disregarded diplomatic signals and intelligence that indicated that the PRC would enter the war if U.S. troops crossed the 38th parallel. India's Ambassador to Beijing, K.M. Panikkar, acting as a conduit for PRC leaders, sent several messages warning that China would respond if U.S. forces entered North Korea. These messages reached the desk of President Truman, but Washington officials discounted them as coming from an unofficial representative of an unrecognized government.¹⁵

On the intelligence side, there was a failure to comprehend the situation that bordered on willful ignorance. MacArthur's staff in Tokyo downplayed indications that Chinese troops were preparing to enter North Korea. Although U.S. forces reported capturing Chinese soldiers on October 23, MacArthur's daily intelligence summary for October 26 discounted this news as "unconfirmed and thereby unaccepted."¹⁶ It was not until November 1, when Beijing announced that Chinese "volunteers" were assisting North Korea, that MacArthur and officials in Washington accepted the fact that China had entered the war.

Even then, there was confusion about the PRC's intentions. A lull in the action between the first and second Chinese offensives gave U.S. officials an opportunity to reassess the situation. MacArthur convinced the JCS that he could and should continue the allied offensive

¹⁴ Collins, pp. 144-46.

¹⁵ Weintraub, p. 185.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 209.

north to the Yalu River. The JCS supported this view in a November 9 NSC meeting and the Truman Administration accepted it. Secretary Acheson would later admit, “all the President’s advisers knew that something was badly wrong, though what it was, how to find out and what to do about it, they muffed.”¹⁷

Finally, over-shadowing all the deliberations was the domestic political situation in the U.S. The “McCarthy Era” was at its height. Right-wing politicians and press attacked any softening of the U.S. policy against Communism and idolized MacArthur. Truman hesitated to deal firmly with MacArthur, as evidenced by his willingness to go halfway around the world, to Wake Island, to meet with him. (For his part, MacArthur professed himself to be too busy with the war to come to Washington to meet his Commander in Chief.) Administration officials gave MacArthur almost complete freedom in the period between Inchon and the allied retreat from North Korea, which he exploited to pursue his anti-Communist agenda and his own dreams of personal glory. The political weakness of the Truman Administration led to indecision that undermined the principle of civilian control of the military at a critical moment.

RETURNING TO THE ORIGINAL PLAN

Chinese offensives through the end of 1950 pushed allied forces south of Seoul and the 38th parallel. The U.S. view of the war, influenced by tremendous mood swings on the part of MacArthur, wavered between defeatism and aggression. MacArthur called for taking the war to China, using nuclear weapons, increasing allied forces on the ground and bringing in Nationalist Chinese troops from Taiwan. The alternative, he warned, would be a costly and humiliating defeat. However, General Ridgeway, who assumed command of allied forces in Korea at the end of December, managed to stabilize the situation and launch a successful counterattack in

¹⁷ Wainstock, p. 84

January, 1951. Ridgeway's offensive provided reassurance that the situation could be salvaged without a major increase in military strength. It was not until March, however, when allied forces had fought their way back to the 38th parallel, that the Administration reached consensus on a new set of political and military objectives.

The State Department drafted a proposal calling for a truce at the line of the 38th parallel. Informed by the JCS on March 20 that President Truman planned to propose an armistice, MacArthur issued a public statement on March 24 threatening to expand the war to PRC territory, but offering to meet with the PRC commander to "discuss realization of the political objectives of the United Nations in Korea." President Truman's armistice proposal was undercut by "MacArthur's ultimatum."¹⁸ On April 5, a Congressman read a letter from MacArthur on the floor of the House that called for taking the war to China. President Truman, supported by Secretaries Acheson and Marshall, decided that MacArthur had to go and the General was recalled from Tokyo.

General Ridgeway was promoted to CINC UN Command in place of MacArthur. On May 31, 1951, the JCS sent him a new directive on U.S. objectives in Korea. These included: 1) inflict maximum losses on North Korean and Chinese forces operating within the geographic boundaries of Korea; 2) terminate hostilities under appropriate armistice arrangements; and 3) establish the authority of the ROK over an area south of a defensible border, but in no case south of the 38th parallel.¹⁹ Six months following the entry of China into the war, allied objectives resumed their initial form. The goalposts were back where they started.

¹⁸ Collins, pp. 271-270.

¹⁹ Ibid., 301.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Hindsight is 20-20. It would be unfair to criticize too harshly those responsible for running the allied campaign (with the possible exception of General MacArthur), but it would be foolish not to try to learn from the mistakes they made. Following are some possible lessons:

- Political and military leaders should be clear about their objectives before entering a war.
- Objectives should be changed with caution and only after careful consideration of whether the strategic environment has changed sufficiently to support a new set of objectives.
- Political and military objectives must be grounded in reality, which requires that they be informed by available information from intelligence and other sources.
- Plan for contingencies, whether for unexpected success, or unexpected reverses.
- Military leaders require freedom to manage their campaigns, but political leaders must be kept informed and in a democracy must retain ultimate authority over the campaign.
- While domestic politics must be taken into account in war planning, they should not be allowed to dominate war planning.

MacArthur said, “there is no substitute for victory.” He was right, but in a limited war victory should not be defined in terms of absolute ends, but in terms of the limited objectives for which the war was launched. The U.S. achieved its limited ends in the Korean War, but at a greatly increased cost due to its failure to stick to its original plans. Victory was purchased at an unnecessarily high price.